

## Globalization and Higher Education in Brazil (2000)

Simon Schwartzman

"Globalization" is nothing new for higher education, an area where countries and institutions traditionally borrow their models and ideas from each other, and where the interchange of personnel is most intense. Many countries, especially in Asia and Africa, have higher education institutions that are direct copies of Western European counterparts, and where the working language is English or French. For these countries, the question is not globalization, but rather the possibilities and limitations of making these globalized assets and competencies more relevant for their societies.

Brazil, as most other Latin American countries, shed its colonial status in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and did not have the experience of significant globalized higher education institutions on its soil. However, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Brazil borrowed extensively from France the models for its higher education and research institutions, some of which, like the School of Mines in Ouro Preto, Minas Gerais and the National Astronomical Laboratory, was ruled by French principals and directors. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Brazil's first and largest university, the Universidade de São Paulo, was patterned after the Italian legislation and led by a team of professors imported from Italy, France and Germany, and, after the Second World War, Brazil's most prestigious engineering school, the Aeronautics Technological Institute in São José dos Campos, was managed by an American. In the last decades, thousands of Brazilian went to get their graduate degrees in American and, to a lesser degree, British, French and German universities. In the late sixties Brazilian higher education was reorganized, and one of the main features of the reform was the adoption of American style graduate education programs by its universities.

Today, Brazil has 2.4 million students in professional degree course programs, 85 thousand in master and doctoral programs, and many more enrolled in all kinds of short-term programs, for a population of about 170 million. The net rate of enrollment is under 10%, meaning that this bound to high rates of growth for the next several years. Most of these students are enrolled in four to six year long, professional degree programs in Administration, Law, Engineering, Accounting, Economics, Medicine, Dentistry and many other fields. There is no undergraduate or "college" post secondary education in the American or British sense, and there is little in terms of short-term, post secondary vocational education. Teaching is always in Portuguese,

and, although English is mandatory in secondary education, higher education students are usually unable to work on it. In master and doctoral programs, teaching is also done in Portuguese, but students are usually required to be able to read in English.

Sixty-five percent of these students are in private institutions, and the others in institutions run by the Federal government and some states. Brazilian higher education institutions can be of different types: large universities, such as the State University of São Paulo and the Federal University in Rio de Janeiro, with 40 to 50 thousand students each, in all fields of knowledge, and some world-class graduate and research programs; and a myriad of small, one-subject "isolated" schools, providing evening classes for students working for the degrees in administration, law or other "soft" field. Public institutions tend to be better, larger, more difficult to get into, and free from tuition. Private institutions, with some significant exceptions, tend to be of lower quality, smaller, easier to get into, and they charge tuition. Legally, all diplomas provided by legally established institutions have the same validity. In practice, a degree from a prestigious university can have a much higher market value than the same degree from an unknown place.

The expectation for the next several years is that the public sector will not increase its investments in higher education, and most of the expected growth will be absorbed by the private sector. Until now, with a few exceptions, the private institutions has aimed at the less qualified, older and usually poorer students who failed to enter a public institution, but still wanted a university-level degree. Their way to respond to this demand was to charge low tuition, teaching evening courses, pack fifty or more students in each class, select subjects with little needs of equipment and laboratory, and pay low wages to teachers and administrators.

As the demand for education grows, and the quality of public institutions suffers from all kinds of difficulties, one could expect the private institutions to start to compete also for the better-qualified students. One easy way for a private institution to get an assurance of quality on the short haul is to establish a link of cooperation with a prestigious, foreign institution. These partnerships between entrepreneurial-minded private institutions in Brazil and foreign counterparts are already taking place, but not in as intensively as one could expect. Several factors may explain it.

The reasons are mostly cultural, it seems. Most Brazilians do not handle English or French, and understand little of Spanish; very few non-Brazilian institutions are familiar with the Portuguese language and understand the peculiarities of Brazil's higher education system and legislation. One could expect that successful partnerships

could occur between Brazilian high quality institutions, which have foreign trained professors and administrators in their staff. But these institutions are less in need of external legitimacy, and can be choosy about offers of courses and technical assistance coming from less qualified foreign institutions.

There are two or three other areas of globalization that might grow in the near future. One has to do with regional integration. Brazil belongs to a local common market with Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, known as "Mercosur", and there are conversations to extend this to a broad American free trade area, linking up with the North American trade association (Mexico, US, and Canada). Labor mobility among commercial patterns is to be expected, and work has already started to provide common standards for academic qualifications among the countries in Mercosur. This is being done by the Ministries of Education of the different countries, and progress can be expected to be slow.

Modern communication technologies can increase the possibilities for cooperation and interchange among Brazilian and non-Brazilian institutions, but one could expect important cultural and linguistic barriers to limit their expansion, and also difficulties in legislation, since there is already great mistrust about the quality and truthfulness of the training and qualifications that can be provided at a distance.

Another area of expansion is regarding institutional accreditation. Some countries - Brazil, Mexico, Chile, among others - are speeding up their internal, government mandated accreditation systems of higher education, and the private sector is reacting, in Brazil, trying to set its own accreditation procedures. In this process, it is possible that some institution will look for accreditation outside their boundaries. This is already happening in Mexico, and my soon start to happen in Brazil.

In all likelihood, international cooperation in higher education in Brazil, in the future, will be done as in the past, that is, among the best professional and research institutions. There will be important differences, of course. In the past, cooperation was mostly done with government support, and for public institutions. Now, one can expect the private institutions and the private sector to get more involved. In the past, it was mostly academic; now, we can expect the business sector to join in. Contacts are already and will be much more intense, due to the new communication facilities. But, on the whole, Brazil will remain, for the next several years, a large and mostly inward looking country, as it has been on the past.